Coming of Age

How a product of the segregated South became an advocate for change. By John Sergent, BA’63, MD’66

I

n the late fall of 1961, I was a member of the Vanderbilt Student Senate, and presented a resolution proposing that the University’s Board of Trust that Vanderbilt should accept “qualified Negro applicants” into the University. Vanderbilt, like almost every other school in the South, was not integrated except in the Divinity School and one or two other graduate programs.

This was a period of extreme student apathy, in which the usual Student Senate debate would relate to something like one-way streets behind some of the sorority houses. However, after the resolution was presented, there was a sudden change in the mood of the campus. Lamar Alexander, then the editor of The Hustler, supported the resolution, as did Roy Blount, Jr., a nationally known humorist and writer.

Before going further into a discussion of the events that followed the submission of that resolution to the Student Senate, a little background is in order. I attended Frankfort High School in Frankfort, Kentucky, and we desegregated in the fall of 1956, my sophomore year. Although Frankfort was never a hotbed of Ku Klux Klan activity, we did have an event that made us all aware of the fact that desegregation was not going to be painless. Our first football game that year was the Friday night before the school year actually started, and there was a lot of interest in the fact that we had several black football players for the first time in the history of Frankfort. We actually went out for pre-game warm-ups, but it was still daylight, and nothing unusual happened. We then went back into the fieldhouse for the pre-game pep talk, and when we came back out it was dark and the lights were on. As we ran onto the field, we saw fires burning on the hill behind the stands. A total of three crosses were burned during that game, with one always in flames.

On the field, however, we didn’t pay much attention to the crosses. Kermit Williams, our quarterback, was 6’2” and 150 pounds and ran the option out of every formation. Kermit scored two touchdowns, and we took the game by a 21-20 victory. There is a picture of all of the team carrying Kermit off the field on our shoulders, with a cross burning in the background. It was published in a national magazine, Life, as I recall.

We had some minor incidents in high school, but essentially the next three years were uneventful, full as far as race relations were concerned. Those were the years of Sputnik and fallout shelters and the “crisis” in American education that had allowed the Russians to get ahead.

We did read about problems in school desegregation in one part of the country, but in Frankfort we seemed to get along just fine. I had always planned on becoming a doctor, and when I received a scholarship to Vanderbilt my college selection process was over.

In 1959-60, my freshman year, the Lawson story erupted, but I had issues of my own to deal with. I had just joined a fraternity and was involved in a number of extra-curricular activities. All in all I was as happy as I had ever been. I saw the pickets around Kirkland Hall, and I read about the turmoil in the Divinity School along with the Department of Medicine and various other departments in the University, but managed mostly to put it out of mind. Even in late-night bull sessions in the dorm, when the topic would come up I would usually be sympathetic but didn’t really want to talk about it. Mostly, I wanted the issue to go away so that I could get back to having a good time in college.

However, it didn’t go away. Around the South schools were being desegregated by court order, often violently, and a few colleges had voluntarily opened their doors to black students. Nashville had become the center for national training for students in sit-in demonstrations as well as what would become the Freedom Rides. Nashville’s two newspapers, The Tennessean and the now defunct Banner, took polar-opposite positions, with The Tennessean proposing racial conciliation and integration and the Banner staunchly opposing it. Complicating this was the fact that the publisher of the Banner, James Stahlman, was a very prominent and generous member of the Vanderbilt Board of Trust.

All of this meant that integration had gradually gone from one of a number of topics to just about the only topic whenever political discussions occurred. I found myself increasingly a focus of interest and sometimes antagonism, primarily because I had attended an integrated school and told my friends that it was no big deal.

I was also a member of the Vanderbilt debate team and had the opportunity to travel to a number of other institutions and meet with students from all over the country. It was increasingly apparent that the segregated schools of the South simply were not at a disadvantage when trying to present themselves as important national institutions. Then of course there is the moral issue. While the opponents of desegregation often talked about the Southern way of life, the potential loss of alumni contributions, and so forth, it was clear that there was absolutely no moral justification for Vanderbilt continuing to be a segregated school.

I remember when I made the decision to present the resolution to the Student Senate. My girlfriend (who has now been my wife for 38 years), and I had been studying in the library one night, and we went over to the long-since-closed Flaming Steer on West End Avenue for a snack. Without warning, over a cheeseburger and french fries, I told her what I was going to do. I think I just wanted to be sure that at least one friend would stick by me. Needless to say, she did.

The week before the vote in the Student Senate were a time of intense politics. The Vanderbilt debate team and Tennessean and the now defunct Banner, took polar-opposite positions, with The Tennessean proposing racial conciliation and integration and the Banner staunchly opposing it. Complicating this was the fact that the publisher of the Banner, James Stahlman, was a very prominent and generous member of the Vanderbilt Board of Trust.

From my vantage point today, I can’t understand the decision to desegregate the school produced surprisingly little turmoil, and was decided at the very next meeting of the Board of Trust after the student body referendum was defeated. Given the composition of the University’s board at that time, it is probably unlikely that they would have voted to desegregate as soon as they did if they had felt that the students were pressuring them into it, so maybe as things worked out it’s just as well that we lost.

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